



Parting Bread, Kathleen Peterson

Mary and Martha Encounter Jesus

SCRIPTURE

Luke 10:38-42

MAIN IDEA

Jesus calls us to value the role of each person in the community of faith.

OPENING PRAYER

Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ in me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit,
Christ where I arise, Christ in the
heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who
speaks to me, Christ in every eye
that sees me, Christ in every ear that
hears me. Salvation is of the Lord.
Salvation is of the Christ. May your
salvation, Lord, be ever with us.
Amen.

*From Saint Patrick's Breastplate,
Patrick of Ireland (c. 389-461).*

INTRODUCTION

Many commentaries and articles have been written about the story of Mary and Martha and you may have read several of them. I chose to include this story in *Sacred Encounters* because of the relationship dynamic Luke presents between these two women. The story is unique to the Gospel of Luke, and at first glance, it appears to be about two sisters who bicker over chores. Most commentaries portray Martha as the sister who prioritized kitchen duties and Mary as the one who prioritized Jesus' teaching. Through the years, preachers have urged us to choose Mary's way—the "better way"—while Martha has been maligned for choosing to do housework. Can we interpret this story from a perspective that will not lead to Martha's condemnation? Can we undo the decades, or even centuries, of this traditional interpretation?

As we look into the story, it is important to note that Luke's Gospel does not say that Martha was in the kitchen, or that she was preparing a meal. The traditional interpretation of kitchen chores is conjecture and is based on Martha's comment that Mary has left her to do all the "work." The assumption is that she was referring to domestic work. We also assume that Martha was in the kitchen preparing a meal due to the principles of hospitality that undergirded Jesus' culture.

Luke 10:38–42

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened

to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered

her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

These principles can be traced back to ancient Israel where hospitality was not merely a question of good manners, but was considered a moral institution. Opening one's home to others grew out of the nomadic life; households welcomed weary travelers and offered them food, drink, and dwelling. Hospitality of this sort was necessary for survival in the desert life of the ancient world. The culture of hospitality continued in the New Testament, but we speculate when we say that Martha was upholding this established tradition and preparing a meal.

Martha's choice to take care of her "many tasks" is interpreted as being less insightful than Mary's choice to sit with Jesus. This interpretation can be traced back to 200 CE and the writings of Origen who was considered the most important theologian and biblical scholar of the early Greek church. In his writings, Origen emphasized that Mary stands "highest" over Martha and their brother Lazarus since, by listening closely to Jesus, she is more enlightened. Martha works more with her hands and understands less.¹⁴ While it may be impossible to reverse centuries of scholarship, it might be possible to re-tell Martha's story for greater understanding. In doing so, what should we say about her?

¹⁴ Amber Belidene, "Martha of Bethany," *Lent Madness*, March 28, 2019; lentmadness.org/2019/03/martha-of-bethany-vs-nico-demus.

Contemplate

In the text, how does Mary, and how does Jesus, treat Martha unfairly?

What have you thought about this story when you've read or heard it at different points in your life?

How do you respond to this story emotionally?

If you are at a place where you can draw conclusions about this story, how do you interpret what happens?

EXAMINE THE CHARACTERS

Eight women are named Mary in the New Testament. How do we tell them apart? We distinguish them by mention of their relatives or their location. In the Gospel of John, Mary is described as living with her siblings, Lazarus and Martha, in the village of Bethany near Jerusalem (Jn 11:1–2). Luke, however, does not mention Lazarus or their village and instead identifies the house as Martha's. Jesus entered the home and Mary sat at his feet to listen to his teaching. This Mary (the sister of Martha and Lazarus) lived in Bethany, a village in Judea. Mary of Bethany is the Mary who sat at Jesus' feet while her sister Martha

fulfilled other responsibilities. She is the same Mary who witnessed Jesus raise her brother, Lazarus, from the dead and anointed Jesus with expensive perfume (Lk 10:38-42; Jn 11; and Jn 12:1-7). Mary Magdalene, another prominent Mary, came from the town of Magdala in Galilee. "Magdalene" means "of Magdala." Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene; she traveled with Jesus and the disciples as a companion. Mary Magdalene was at Jesus' crucifixion, and she was the first person to see the resurrected Christ (Lk 8:2; Mk 15:40; and Jn 20:11-18).

Martha, depicted unfavorably by Luke, is seen in a more positive way by John. According to John, Martha made a profession of faith after her brother, Lazarus, died: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (Jn 11:27). Over time, Luke's characterization of Martha as a homemaker evolved into the dominant view. In the Roman Catholic tradition, Martha is venerated as "St. Martha" and she is the patron saint of cooks, housewives, servants, waiters, and waitresses.

In the story, Jesus is the apparent reason for the tension between the two sisters. Luke does not mention why Jesus was visiting Martha's home, but from other stories in the Gospels, it is evident that Jesus was close friends with Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus. This could have been a visit to spend time with friends since they were part of Jesus' inner circle, or Jesus could have been en route to another city to spread the gospel and found rest and refreshment at the home of his friends. Clearly, their relationship was special because it is mentioned in all four of the Gospels. They were disciples

of Jesus, certainly, but even more than that, they were friends. Jesus had visited their home more than once, sharing meals, conversations, and each other's company.

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SACRED ENCOUNTER

Luke says Mary "sat at the Lord's feet" (Lk 10:39). To sit at someone's feet was a phrase used to describe the relationship between a teacher and a student, usually to receive higher education. Paul used this phrase to describe his relationship with his teacher, Gamaliel, saying, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law" (Acts 22:3). In the ancient world, male disciples sat at the feet of their teachers or rabbis but women were prohibited from this practice. Possibly Mary assumed this posture because she was being trained as a disciple. Jesus was intentional about teaching his disciples and Mary eventually became an asset in proclaiming the gospel. By including the story of Jesus teaching Mary, Luke is pointing out the extraordinary place of women in the Jesus movement and highlighting how encounters with Jesus often subverted cultural norms.¹⁵

While we may not traditionally categorize Martha's encounter with Jesus as a sacred one, she did indeed have one—a sacred encounter that looked different from Mary's. The reason why Luke does not detail exactly what Martha was doing and

why Jesus chose to reprimand her could be that Martha was engaged in a leadership role in the church. She may have been serving the Eucharist or planning Jesus' itinerary. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a pioneer in biblical interpretation, suggests that women must adopt a hermeneutic of imagination, seeking ways to re-tell this story and to read other stories of women in the Bible with fresh eyes.¹⁶ Another interpretation of Martha's encounter with Jesus is that, even though Martha needed Mary's help to complete her tasks, Jesus invited her to sit with Mary at his feet instead. Jesus knew that both these women would play integral roles in the movement and, since he only had a short time with them until his death, receiving instruction from him was of vital importance. I invite you to rethink this story and imagine that Jesus was not reprimanding Martha but inviting her to sit with him and engage in his teaching.

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Training Mary to be a disciple and inviting Martha to receive instruction had implications for the progress of the early church. Jesus' decision to let

¹⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1993), S. Lk 10:39.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 262.



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women join in this work is the reason why so many women (ordained and non-ordained) are leading today's church. Luke 8:1-3 says, "Soon afterwards [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources." These women were not passive bystanders, rather, they actively and materially supported Jesus' ministry. His inclusion of women also gave the apostle Paul the authority to recruit women to be part of the gospel mission. Paul saw the value of teaching women and preparing women for various leadership opportunities in the church. Romans 16:1-15 reads like a roll call of early church women leaders including Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufo's mother, and Nereus's sister. These women were leaders in the church; they were involved in the preaching and teaching of new converts, and their leadership helped the Christian movement expand and flourish.

Michael J. Kruger, professor of Early Christianity, explains that the number of women who converted to the Christian faith in the early church was disproportionate to the gender ratio of the Greco-Roman world.¹⁷ The philosopher Celsus mocked the Christian faith as a religion of women. Christianity became popular because the church gave women opportunities for honorable and dignified ministries. Kruger notes the presence of women in the earliest source of Christian history involved leading in ministries of caring for the poor and imprisoned, missions, hosting home churches, and funding the work of the kingdom.

¹⁷ Michael J. Kruger, "Was Early Christianity Hostile to Women?" *Canon Fodder*, August 1, 2019; michaeljkruger.com/was-early-christianity-hostile-to-women-2.

Contemplate

How does your church live into the concept of the priesthood of all believers?

How can you encourage the planning and implementation of ongoing Bible study at your church?

What can you do to encourage people of all ages to study the Bible daily and weekly?

Reimagining Martha's role in the Jesus movement and acknowledging Mary's role as Christ-given allows us to reaffirm the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers for our Reformed churches today. The priesthood of all believers dismantles the notion of hierarchy and selectivity in the church and affirms that each person has access to God and God's word. Teaching this theological concept can help each person recognize their importance in the church and foster a sense of belonging. It moves us from a clergy-centric or pastor-centric model of church to one in which everyone feels valued and everyone has a part to play in the mission of Christ.

CLOSING PRAYER

May God the Father bless us, may Christ take care of us, the Holy Ghost enlighten us all the days of our life. The Lord be our defender and keeper of body and soul, both now and forever, to the ages of ages. Amen.¹⁸

Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester (c. 904/9-984). His birth year is also unknown. He was bishop from 963-984.

¹⁸ This is an ancient prayer and the original language has been used.